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ABSTRACT

This report stems from the misunderstanding of what general standardized tests and standardized admission tests can and were designed to do, and an uneasiness with certain discoveries concerning biases in the tests. Important issues such as margin of error, predictive value, social and racial bias, and the effects of coaching are the very issues that test-takers would be aware of with Truth-in-Testing legislation. Truth-in-Testing legislation would require testing companies to disclose certain information to the test-takers both at the time of the test and through an intermediary. Legislation already passed in New York is pending in Congress. Among the most important provisions of the legislation are: (1) disclosure of all questions and correct answers after each test; (2) rules for transferring raw scores into scores reported to the test-takers: (3) disclosure of test studies, evaluations, or reports pertinent to the test: and (4) disclosure of correlation data concerning students' grades and test score and career performance and test score. (Author/GK)

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"Why Truth-In-Testing?"

Abstract

Standardized tests in general and standardized admissions tests in particular have come under increasing scrutiny over the past couple years. The reasons for this examination stem form a general misunderstanding of what the tests can and were designed to do and an uneasiness with certain discoveries concerning biases in the tests. Issues dealing with margin of error, predictive value , social class and racial bias and effects of coaching all enter into the discussion. "Truth-in-Testing" legislation , a reporting and disclosure measure, hopes to open up the now secretive and misunderstood testing process. The most important provisions of the legislation include: a. disclosing all questions and correct answers after each test.

b. rules for transferring raw scores into scores reported to the test-taker.

c. disclosure of test studies, evaluations or reports pertinent to the test.

d. disclosure of correlation data concerning students' grades and test score and career performance and test score.

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Speech Given By Bob Lathrop,
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at the
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March 5, 1980
"Why Truth-in-Testing?"

Standardized tests in general and standardized admissions tests in particular have come under increasing scrutiny over the past couple years. The reasons for this examination stem from a general misunderstanding of what the tests can and were designed to do and an uneasiness with certain discoveries concerning biases in the tests.

Considering the use of standardized admissions tests as a tool to allocate a public good, education, the need for a public discussion of this issue is indeed great. The analogy of a public utility is not too far-fetched. In order for someone to enter higher education the taking of a standardized admission test is a necessity, and, like a public utility, an individual doesn't have much choice concerning who supplies the test. Unlike a public utility though, consumers of admissions tests have no mechanism to enlist accountability of test developers.

Test results can literally change the course of an individual's life. A poor score can often inhibit or stifle one's initiative for further education. For this crucial reason and the fact that testing companies are almost totally unaccountable to the public, the need for more information about the testing process is a basic issue of fairness.

"Truth-in-Testing" legislation in no way seeks to abolish all testing, as some opponents suggest, or is in any way anti-testing. The value of tests as an evaluative tool is unquestioned and an integral part of the education process. The concept of "Truth-in-Testing" follows the lead of truth-in-Packaging and Truth-in-Labeling laws. Basically these laws say, 'what is represented to be in the package is clearly stated on the outside.' Any consumer of products or services has a basic right to know what they are buying. As it stands now test-takers don't know what they're buying. What they do know is that if they want

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to get from A to B (high school to college, college to graduate school, etc.) they have to take a standardized admissions test.

"Truth-in-Testing" simply states that testing companies will have to tell test-takers certain things about the tests that test-takers are unaware of at present. Some of the things that test-takers would be aware of if "Truth-in-Testing" were in force include the tests' margin of error, predictive value, biases, effects of coaching and whether testing fees are at appropriate levels.

MARGIN OF ERROR

The margin of error is a little known fact to the vast majority of test-takers. One of the myths perpetuated about standardized admissions tests is their ability to distinguish abilities between individuals to a very fine degree. In fact, a 72 point difference on the SAT math section (and 66 points on the SAT verbal section) is so statistically insignificant that "it can't be taken seriously."[1] For the LSAT, a difference of 67 points cannot be taken seriously. Yet 67 points can be the difference of one student being admitted or not to most law schools.

PREDICTIVE VALUE

The results of standardized admissions tests are not simply presented as measures of performance on certain multiple choice questions but rather as measures of "aptitude" or "developed abilities." This not only effects one's opportunities for advancement in the education system but also influences one's own feeling of self-worth. These measures of "aptitude" and "developed abilities" are then used to predict one's future success in school.

A recent study by Allan Nairn[2] has shown that the ability to predict future grades is not much better than simply rolling a pair of dice. In fact, on average it is only 8-15% better for ETS(Educational Testing Service) admissions tests. Additionally, if most test-takers knew that the SAT, for example, only improves by 5% the prediction already offered by previous grades, their

insecurity and anziety levels, to say the least, would probably be much lower when taking the test.

Even ETS researchers seem skeptical of the use of first year college grades, the criterion on which ETS rests much of its claims for the test's validity. In an ETS Research Memorandum uncovered by Nairn, ETS researcher Dr. Ronald Flaugher assessed the use of first year grades as the criterion for prediction when he said, "No one can be found who will seriously defend the Freshman year grade-point average as an important gauge of anything very important in life's list of desirable values, and in fact, a case is often made for its perversity. Yet, primarily because it is so easily obtained, it is the most frequent criterion variable in use for validating college selection procedures."[3]

SOCIAL CLASS AND RACIAL BIASES

The evidence that is accumulating in regards to certain biases is one more reason to open-up the mysteries of standardized admissions tests. The often heard argument that the tests are blind simply is misleading. The tests discriminate between income and race.

For income,"a College Board statistical report illustrates this point: The ranking by ETS scores of 647,031 students who took the 1973-4 SAT was systematically related to family income."[4] A score of 250-299 corresponds to a mean income of $11,428 while a 650-699 score corresponds to a mean income of $21,292. This correspondence holds steady for all levels of income and not just for 'rich' and 'poor.' The tests discriminate not only between a minority of Americans and the rich but also between the rich and the majority of Americans, the working and middle class.

Journalist Steven Brill uncovered an ETS study that showed a 133 point gap in mean LSAT scores between Black and White test-takers. "And according to information presented in the Law School Admission Council's brief in the Bakke case, 37% of White Students taking the LSAT in 1976, for example received scores

of 600 or above compared to only 3% of the Black students."[5]

. Before the respondibility for these findings can be determined, they must be available for public examination. Steven Brill received the findings of the ETS study showing the 133 point gap not because ETS wanted him to see it but because an employee within ETS felt it important that he see it. If the Law School Admissions Council hadn't submitted a brief in the Bakke case, the public might never have known that 37% of White students taking the LSAT scored over 600 while only 3% of Black students did the same.

EFFECTS OF COACHING

Whether standardized admissions tests are coachable or not has been a long standing argument. A study done in May of 1979 by the Federal Trade Commission showed a gain of from 25-100 points attributable to coaching. Claims such as this strike at the heart of the assertion that an ETS admissions test measures "aptitude." How can you coach someone to improve "aptitude?" You either have it or you don't. This of course is why ETS discounts the effects of coaching on test scores. To admit that their tests are coachable is to say that they don't measure what they purport to measure.

The Commissioner of the FTC puts his finger on the problem when he said after the release of the report, "What I drew out of the study, was that students could be helped by coaching and that ETS was not disclosing that information.."[6] Again the test-taker is virtually kept in the dark about certain aspects of the testing process. But the public has a way of cutting through obfuscation. In this case we find them going in great numbers to coaching schools. Universities themselves have classes on test-wiseness. ETS, however, continues to discount and ignore the possibility that coaching improves scores. At the very least, test-takers should be aware going into the tests that coaching may help their scores.

PROPOSED TRUTH-IN-TESTING LEGISLATION

The problems are many and the questions even more numerous. Most issues are not black and white as they are often depicted in the headlines and on the evening news.

More times they are varying shades of gray. The standardized testing issue is no exception. But public policy issues are often dealt with finally by a YES or NO verdict. Public policy makers don't have the opportunity to vote 60% YES and 40% No.

Truth-in-Testing legislation is an attempt to split the middle between those who don't want to see any change or "interference" from the lay person and those who would just as soon see the tests disappear altogether. What both of these positions fail to see is the basic right of information for a consumer of a service on the one hand and total disregard for any objective measure on the other.

Truth-in-Testing is a reporting and information measure, a disclosure bill, no more. The legislation would require testing companies to disclose certain information to the test-taker both at the time of the test and also through an intermediary. In New York State, where legislation passed in July of 1979 and in Congress, where legislation is pending, that intermediary is the Department of Education. Briefly, this is what is included: (see attachment)

In conclusion: a. standardized admissions tests play an important role in shaping futures and feelings of self-worth.

b. Test-takers are virtually captive consumers. They have to take the test, at the time, place and price designated. The alternative is really no choice.

c. Test companies who survive and thrive on the fees of students should have the good sense to respond to concerns by those students and supply them with information about the tests. "Truth-in-Testing" promises to provide more understanding to the standardized admissions test process and encourage responsible use of these tests.

FOOTNOTES

1. Brill, Steven, "The Secrecy Behind the College Boards", NEW YORK Magazine, October, 1974.
   For a further discussion of this issue see "The Test Score: Mystification at the Razor's Edge", Nairn, Allan, The Reign of ETS: The Corporation That Makes Up Minds, The Ralph Nader Report on the Educational Testing Service, pg. 152-160, Ralph Nader, 1980

2. Nairn, Allan, The Reign of ETS:The Corportation That Makes Up Minds, pg. 59.

3. Ibid., pg. 82

4. Ibid., pg. 200

5. Ibid., pg. 133

6. Ibid., pg. 108

attachment to "Why Truth-in-Testing?"

Section-by-Section Summary of the Educational Testing Act of 1979

Sec. 1: States title

Sec. 2: Findings and Purposes

Sec. 3: Information to Test Subjects and Postsecondary Educational Institutions

States that each test agency shall provide to any test taker in clear and understandable language a minimun of information that should accompany the registration form.

--purpose of test
--subject matter of test and knowledge and skills being tested
--correlation of certain data concerning students grades and test score and career performance and test score; margin of error and explanation of scoring scale
--ability test preparation courses to improve students' scores
--how score will be reported
--how background information on student will be reported
--privacy rights of students
--how long student scores will be kept
--time period in which student will receive score
--services for handicapped students
--comparison of test score performace of students and major income group
--notice that upon request the studentcan receive a copy of his answer sheet with the answers revealed and the appeal or review procedure if student wishes to question his/her score

Also requires that if scores of test subject is delayed over 10 days, test subject and institution where score is sent will be notified of delay.

Sec. 4: Reports and Statistical Data and Other Information

Requires the Commissioner of Education to be provided the following:

--studies, evaluations or statistical reports pertinent to a test which are prepared by test agency. Requires specific names within studies, etc. to be protected.
--a copy of contract for services between test agency that produces test and another test agency that sponsors or administers the same test.
--requires a report within a year by Commissioner on the above and other info. Requires all data submitted to Commissioner to be public record.

The Commissioner must also include an evaluation of available data concerning relationship between test scores and the completion of test preparation courses.

Sec. 5: Promoting a Better Understanding of Tests

This section requires additional information to the Commissioner in order to promote a better understanding of standardized tests and stimulate independent research on such tests.

Each test agency must provide:

- --a copy of standardized test within 30 days after the results of such tests are released.
- --a copy of all test questions used in calculating test score (raw score).
- --corresponding acceptable answers to those questions.
- --all rules for transferring raw scores into scores reported to the test subject and postsecondary educational institutions with an explanation of such rules.

Similar information should be made availabe to students if requested. The test agency should provide individual answer sheet of students as well if so requested.

The information submitted to the Commissioner shall be made available to the state education agencies or commissions and will be public record.

Sec. 6: Privacy of Test Scores

Clearly states that no test score of an individual can be released to anyone without a specific authorization from individual test subject.

Sec. 7: Testing costs and fees to Students

In order to ensure that tests are being offered at a reasonable and affordable costs to test subjects, certain financial information will be provided to the commissioner by test agency.

Sec. 8: Regulations and Enforcement

Sets out that the Commissioner shall promulgate regulations for bill within 120 days after effective date of the Act and that failure or regulations to be promulgated in a timely rashion will not stop the bill from becoming effective.

Also sets a penalty for noncomplicance with the act and expresses severability.

Sec. 9: Definitions

Contains all key definitions of terms used in the Act.

Sec. 10: Effective Date -- 180 days after date of enactment.